



**KANSAS
STATE
HISTORICAL
SOCIETY**



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KANSAS HISTORY CENTER

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Constitution Hall
Cottonwood Ranch
First Territorial Capitol
Fort Hays
Goodnow House
Grinter Place
Hollenberg Station
Kaw Mission
Marais des Cygnes Massacre

CERTIFICATION OF STATE REGISTER LISTING

The Register of Historic Kansas Places includes all Kansas properties nominated to the National Register as well as lower threshold properties which are listed on the state register only.

Property Name: **The John Steuart Curry Boyhood Home**

Address: **Old Jefferson Town, Highway 59, Oskaloosa, Kansas 66066**

Legal:

County: **Jefferson County**

Owner: **Jefferson County Historical Society**

Address: **Box 146, Oskaloosa, Kansas 66066**

National Register eligible _____

State Register eligible ✓

This property was approved by the Kansas Historic Sites Board of Review for the Register of Historic Kansas Places on **August 23, 1997**.

I hereby certify that this property is listed on the Register of Historic Kansas Places.

State Historic Preservation Officer

8/25/97

Date

09/95



— Thad Allton/The Capital-Journal

Betty Leech, a member of the Jefferson County Historical Society, positioned a picture on the wall of the John Stuart Curry home in Old Jefferson Town in Oskaloosa. The home, which opens to the public on

Saturday, is a museum and memorial to the famous native artist Curry. The home will be open from 1 to 5 p.m. Saturdays and from 1:30 to 5 p.m. Sundays throughout the spring and summer.

Artist Curry's boyhood home restored

By LOU ANN THOMAS
Special to The Capital-Journal

OSKALOOSA — When the John Stuart Curry Boyhood Home Museum and Living Memorial officially opens on Saturday the artist's third cousin, Brian Winsor, will be especially proud.

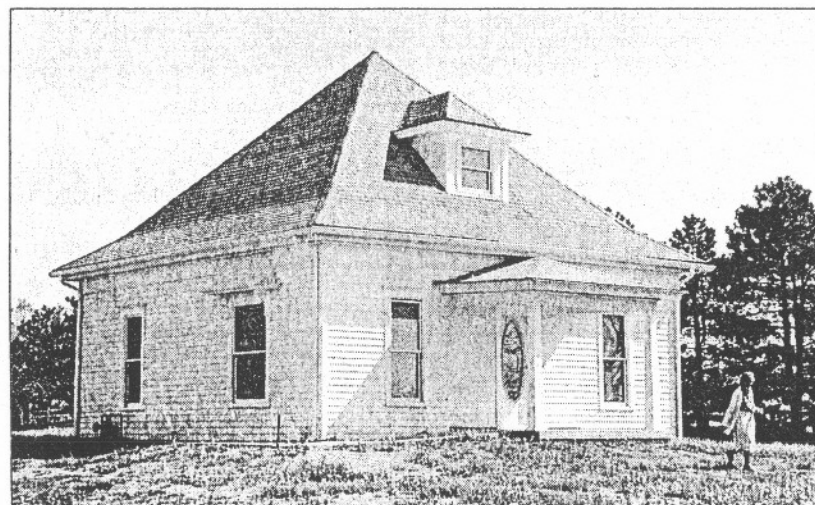
Winsor, a Winchester native and freshman at Emporia State University, along with volunteers from the Jefferson County Historical Society, have been working for seven years to get the artist's boyhood home ready for the public.



Betty Leech

The home was moved in 1990 from outside Winchester to the grounds of Old Jefferson Town, located on the south edge of Oskaloosa. Renovations have been going on since then to create a museum and memorial to the famous native son.

"Bruce and Roberta Curry gave the house to the historical society on the condition that we move it," said Betty Leech, a historical society member. "The county was going to destroy it. It was in pretty bad shape. We moved it and have been working



on it ever since."

Leech and Winsor say the project would never have been completed without a lot of volunteer help.

Audean Kramer, McLouth, donated some of his labor in renovating the house. Leech said Kramer's input was invaluable, because he had worked on the house while the Currys still owned it.

"He was able to tell us the kitchen was here and the bathroom there," Leech said. "He was incredibly valuable to the completion of this project and its authenticity."

Since the historical society depends largely on donations and volunteers, work progressed only

when money was available.

The group receives \$12,000 a year in county tax money, and Leech said insurance on the replica of an 1860's town takes almost half. With utilities, mowing and upkeep on the buildings, they would be out of business without donations, Leech said.

Curry, born in November 1897, is probably best known for the murals he painted in the wings of the rotunda in the Statehouse. But that project wasn't without controversy.

Curry never finished the project, nor did he sign "Tragic Prelude," a scene depicting John Brown, or the "Kansas Pastoral" murals in the wings.

Winsor said after completing these

murals Curry discovered the Italian marble wainscoting in the rotunda was two feet taller than in the wings. He asked the Legislature to remove the marble so the murals would flow from the wings to the rotunda with the same size and perspective.

"They refused, and John took that as an indication they loved the Italian marble more than they loved their native son," Winsor said.

Curry left Kansas to live in Connecticut. When he died of a heart attack in 1947, his wife, Kathleen, said he died of a broken heart because of the way his home state had treated him.

"She still has not returned to Kansas," Winsor said of the 97-year-old, who still resides in Connecticut. She has donated many of Curry's personal effects for display in the boyhood home, including two of his outfits that are in self-portraits.

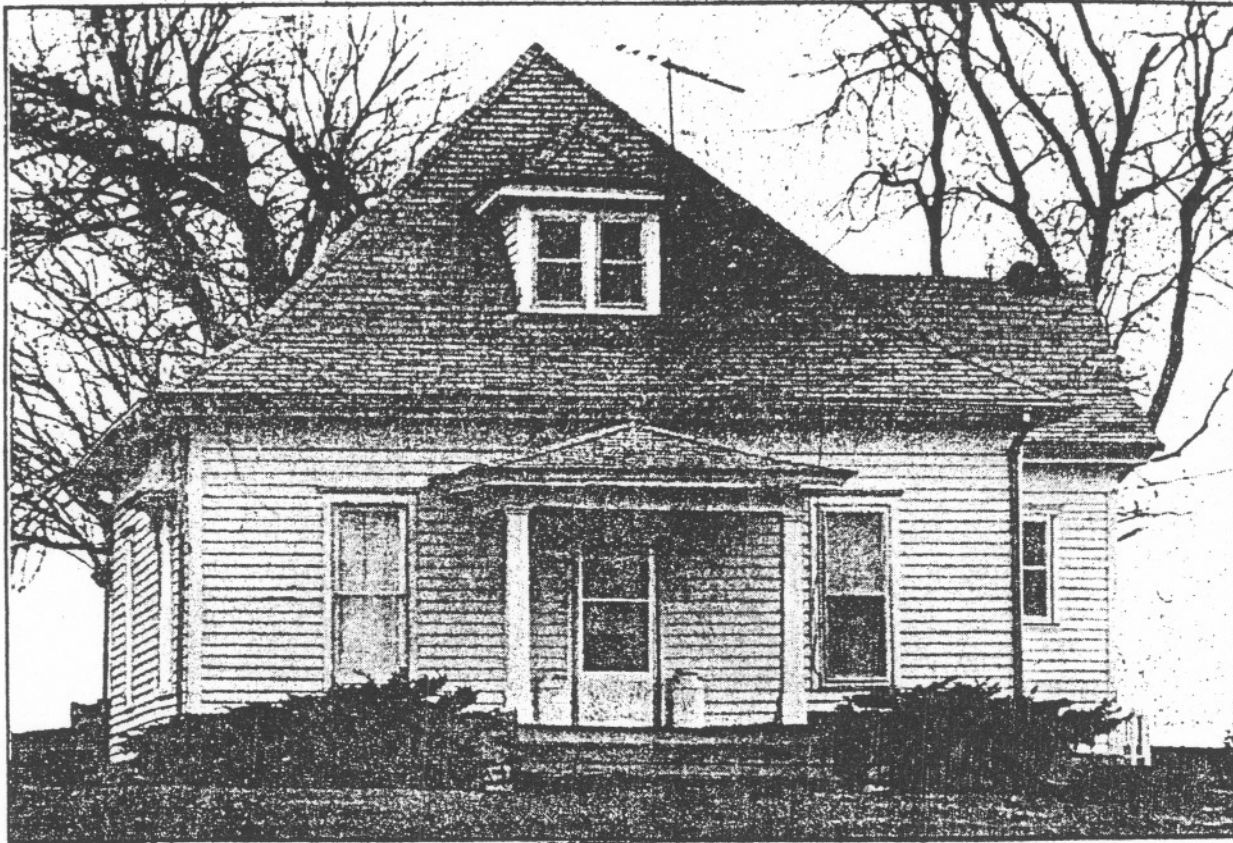
Winsor said he would like her to see the work that has been done to honor the Kansas artist.

Ceremonies begin at 1:30 p.m. Saturday. The Old Jefferson Town and the Curry museum and living memorial will be open from 1 to 5 p.m. Saturdays and from 1:30 to 5 p.m. Sundays throughout the spring and summer.

The building will be dedicated Aug. 9 during the annual Curry family reunion, at which time the artist's 100th birthday will be recognized.

KANSAS
Valley Falls Vindicator

NOV 30 1989



Curry boyhood home

The Jefferson County Historical Society wants to move this house to Old Jefferson Town. It's the boyhood home of the famed artist John Steuart Curry.

As part of an ongoing effort to raise funds for the project, the JCHS will sponsor a White Elephant Sale Saturday from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. at the Oskaloosa city building.

Members of the Jefferson County Art Guild have donated several works of art and bids can be placed on the works until they are opened at 4 p.m.

(Photo by Mike Tomlinson)

Press Clipping Division
Kansas Press Service, Inc.
Affiliate of Kansas Press Association
Box 1773, Topeka, Kansas 66601

KANSAS
Leavenworth Times

AUG - 1 1969

21 Saving Curry's home

Winchester residents have launched a drive to pay for the removal of the John Steuart Curry boyhood home to Old Jefferson Town at Oskaloosa. An old fashioned ice cream social at the Winchester city park raised more than \$650 toward the \$15,000 estimated cost of moving the structure.

Curry (1897-1946) is probably best known in Kansas for his murals in the state capital at Topeka, including one portraying John Brown.

About half of the \$15,000 has been subscribed. The project is worthwhile and should be successful. The Jefferson County Historical Society has been given the structure by its owner, conditioned upon moving it from its present site eight miles north of Oskaloosa and a quarter mile from U.S. 59.

Old Jefferson Town consists of an authentic church, school, jail, blacksmith replica, general store and Victorian style houses dating from the late 1800s and early 1900s. The complex is situated on seven acres at Oskaloosa.

The need to preserve our heritage becomes more important with each passing year. Once a structure has deteriorated to the point of structural instability it becomes a safety hazard. Buildings of significant historical value shouldn't be lost to the wrecking ball.

JF

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CURRY of Kansas

Historical society may preserve birthplace of regionalist painter John Steuart Curry

By CAROLYN McMASTER
J-W Arts Editor

The stormy day of Aug. 13 was exactly the sort of day that John Steuart Curry would have captured on canvas. Clouds in different shades of gray boiled up in the sky, and steady winds pushed dark shadows across rolling cornfields, bringing rain with them.

"He would have done something with that, all right!" said Renwick Eugene Curry, the artist's younger brother, standing on the front porch of the John Steuart Curry Memorial Gallery and museum in Oskaloosa. "He was deeply sensitive, you could say that," Curry said.

Gene Curry, 88, was visiting the area where the brothers grew up for the annual family reunion. John Steuart Curry died in August 1946, at the age of 48. He is buried in the cemetery of the Reform-

ed Presbyterian Church in Winchester. There was more than a reunion to draw the Curry descendants — including the painter's cousin, Nelle Curry Manville, who lives in Winchester and founded the gallery — to gather this year. They had to discuss moving the farmhouse where the artist lived until he was 19 to the Jefferson County Historical Society's Old Jefferson Town in Oskaloosa, where it would also house the gallery and museum.

THE HOMESTEAD, just southwest of Winchester, was built in 1880 by Gene and John's grandfather. He died shortly thereafter, but the brothers were born there. It is currently owned by Bruce Curry, a distant cousin who lives in Florida, and is rented out. He offered to give the house to the historical society if they would pay for moving, renovation and upkeep.

Money is a problem. The cost of the project totals the society's annual maintenance budget of \$15,000, plus at least \$12,000 to \$15,000 in annual upkeep, according to Raymond Riley, the historical society's president.

It will cost about \$7,000 to move the building to a new site in Old Jefferson Town, plus \$2,000 for a new foundation. And should it be restored as it was around the turn of the century? The ceilings have since been lowered, and conservation efforts would cost at least \$5,000, bringing the total to roughly \$15,000 — a conservative estimate, said Riley.

The society is seeking donations and exploring other funding sources, such as grants from the Kansas Arts Commission. Bruce Curry has given the society a year to come up with the money, and if the funds aren't raised, he will "re-evaluate his offer," Riley said.

"WE REALLY don't have any money to refurbish the building," he said during the meeting with the Curry relatives. He said the society is interested in preserving the Curry farmhouse only if the family consents, which it did.

According to Eugene Curry and Mrs. Manville, there couldn't be a better way to honor the painter than to exhibit art by different artists. Mrs. Manville, who ran the gallery until this summer, said she was in favor of moving the homestead as long as it would be used for the memorial gallery and Curry museum.

"He thought that encouraging local artists was greater than his own work," Eugene Curry said during the meeting.

"This was organized from just a pony pasture," Mrs. Manville said of Old Jefferson Town. "Not a building here. . . . It has been done bit by bit by bit as we could get the money together."

Mrs. Manville spearheaded the memorial gallery and museum project, where local artists display their work on weekends from May to September. It opened in August 1977.

"She has been the heart and soul of it," said Riley. "There were a lot of dif-

ferent people who helped, but I don't think the thing would have flown if she hadn't been a part of it."

"WITHOUT WARNING, they gave me the front room and said you can do what you will with it," recalled Mrs. Manville. "I said, 'that's just the thing, we'll have a living memorial.'"

It is fitting that the John Steuart Curry Memorial Gallery is in Oskaloosa, for he rode there on horseback in 1909 for his first formal art lessons from Alice Worswick. A couple of her loose, fluid drawings in pastel colors are on view at the gallery, along with some of the artist's paintbrushes, sketches, lithographs, painting reproductions, photographs of his family, documents on the artist's life and items such as the flag seen in the 1928 painting, "The Return of Private Davis."

After 1906, when he went to study for two years at the Chicago Art Institute, Curry would never return to live in Kansas again. But he always remembered his origins and regularly visited his parents' farm, where he drew and sketched scenes of Kansas. His gray mare, Daisy, is recognizable in some of his paintings, says Mrs. Manville; she has



(Staff photo by Mike Yoder)



(Photos by Carolyn McMaster)

Top, a sign reproducing the artist's signature marks the Curry Memorial Gallery at Old Jefferson Town in Oskaloosa. The farmhouse where John Steuart Curry was born, above, still is owned by the Curry family. It may be preserved and moved to Oskaloosa. Below, the artists brushes and a sketch from 1919 are among the items on display at the museum.



Renwick Eugene Curry, 88, came to the Curry reunion a week ago to his home in Armonk, N.Y., as he does nearly every year.



Identified the farms and other locations the settings for his Kansas In "Tornado," for example, is the backyard of his birthplace.

See Kansas, page 3D

Kansas never truly honored painter in his lifetime

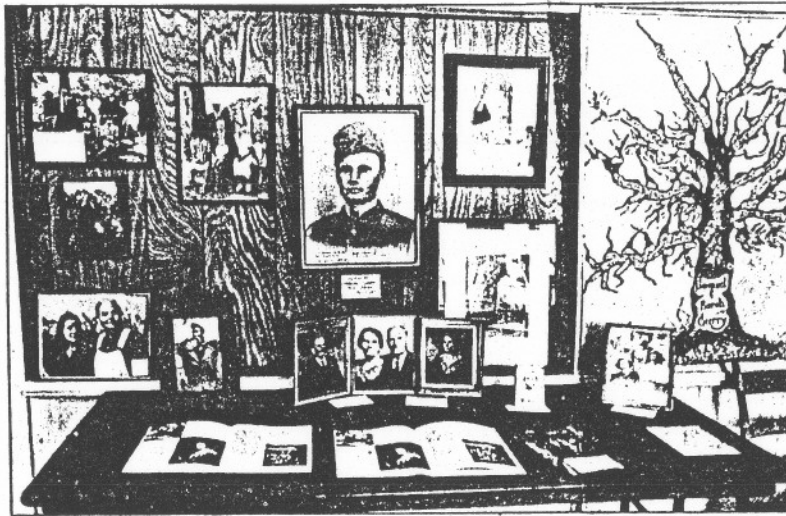
(Continued from page 1D)

thplace; the storm cellar still exists.

Yet even though the state of Kansas never truly acknowledged the triumphs and success of the artist in his lifetime, his name was linked with Grant Wood of Iowa and Thomas Hart Benton of Missouri. The three were considered foremost regionalist painters of the '30s and '40s. Curry's paintings, too, were in the top museums in the country: "Baptism in Kansas" was purchased by the Whitney Museum of American Art in 1930, and in 1932 the Metropolitan Museum of Art bought "Spring Shower."

The state of Kansas commissioned Curry to create murals for the Capitol building, but the artist was under fire for his conceptions from the beginning of the project in 1937 until he left them, incomplete, in 1941. He died five years later.

AND THE FIRST major exhibition in Kansas honoring the state's native son was Kansas University's retrospective at the University Art Museum length of the farm wife's dress and the redness of the Hereford bull were loud. Yet, as Calder Pickett wrote in the University Art Museum's register of 1959, the John Brown mural really had folks up in arms. Pickett reported that, in 1941, one state senator raged that Brown was no more than a crazy murderer, and shouldn't be included in Kansas history; others believed dust storms and tornadoes were better ignored than highlighted.



Some memorabilia at the John Stuart Curry Memorial Gallery includes these photographs and portraits of the painter and his family, as well as the family tree.

Yet arguments were divided. Pickett writes that in 1939 the Kansas City Star editorialized: "After all, wouldn't it be an unbalanced viewpoint which presented only the favorable aspects of the state? Kansas does not have the motto 'ad astra per aspera' for nothing."

THE THIRD PART, a series of small scenes for the rotunda depicting modern-day prosperity, were never completed. The project came to a standstill when the state wouldn't remove slabs of marble in the rotunda. Curry, who had completed the second-floor

murals, refused to sign his work or finished the project. The "Tragic Prelude" mural of John Brown remains, in the art historians, one of his finest achievements.

"He felt everything very deeply," Eugene Curry recalled. "And he often had fits of depression. He

got down, down and discouraged — not depression — fits of discouragement about his work.

"But he was usually ebullient and cheerful, always kindly about people. He never got into a lot of disagreements."

Curry had created murals at the departments of justice and the interior in Washington, D.C. — and neither generated the heat that the Topeka project did. (Works by Wood and Benton, too, stirred up controversy. Benton drew heat for his murals in Jefferson City, Mo., and Wood for his dour portraits of the Daughters of the American Revolution and the farm couple in "American Gothic.")

HIS BROTHER, said Curry, who died of a heart attack in 1946, five years after he abandoned the incomplete murals, was scarred by the harsh criticism and controversy that boiled up over the murals.

The scandal affected him "terribly," said Eugene Curry. "Broke his heart. Hastened his death."

Renwick Eugene Curry is a cheerful, dapper fellow. For the reunion festivities, he wore a blue plaid shirt and floppy bow tie. His sister, Mildred Curry Fike of Tacoma Park, Md., is the other surviving Curry sibling. She was born in 1909.

Eugene Curry is fond of pointing out that when his brother went to the University of Wisconsin in 1936 to be artist-in-residence it was not as part of the art department but at the invitation of the dean of the college of agriculture. He was recommended for the job by Grant

Wood. Curry remained in the job for 10 years, making Madison his home.

"He was always interested in drawing, sketching," said his brother, recalling his early days at the eight-room Hickory Point schoolhouse near Winchester. "He'd do various arithmetic lessons by drawing three cows and four cows to make seven."

THE ARTIST dropped out of high school in 1916 to attend the Kansas City Art Institute, but left, discouraged, after only a month. He was considered a country bumpkin by his classmates and not allowed the freedom of expression he craved.

So he went to work for \$1.65 a day as a railroad section hand so he could buy a suit and attend the Chicago Art Institute. He stayed in Chicago for two years, supporting himself with odd jobs.

The two brothers were very close. John painted family portraits for Eugene, and when the artist lived in Westport, Conn. (1924-1936), his brother, an economics teacher, was in nearby Rye, N.Y.

And the painter's heart always remained in the Midwest.

"He was very active in the farm," his brother said. "And he was also very much attuned with nature ... the great storms had a tremendous effect on him."

"He felt the great force of the eternal, and the primitive forces of nature. And God was right up in the heavens directing all this vast panorama. It's what we all believed, and it's probably all still true."

**You are Invited to the Dedication
of the**

**John Steuart Curry Boyhood Home
Museum and Living Memorial**

August 9, 1997

**on the Grounds of
Jefferson County Historical Society
Oskaloosa Kansas, Hwy 59**

Program to begin at 10:00 a.m.

Section #7- Description

The home was built on the farm of Smith and Margaret Steuart Curry near Dunavant, Kansas. The builders were: carpenters: J. Al Davis, J.D. Boyer, O.H. Curry; stone mason: Rains; brick masons: L.W. Keaton, William Wilkerson; plasterer: Perry C. Goff. The building had five rooms on the ground floor with a loft consisting of two large closets and a small sleeping area. The front porch had two wooden post supports resting on a limestone wall. A north and south gable with windows in each and a small wooden overhang on one east and one west window are the only decorative features. In the '60s a bathroom was added onto the existing open porch on the back side of the house and both were enclosed at that time. The four inch pine flooring was replaced with oak.

In 1991 the home was moved to "Old Jefferson Town" on Jefferson County Historical Society property. It was slated to be destroyed and was offered to the JCHS by the owners, Mr. and Mrs. Bruce Curry, if the organization would move the house to its grounds to preserve. The back porch and bathroom were removed at that time, a concrete foundation built to receive the house and the move was made by a commercial mover.

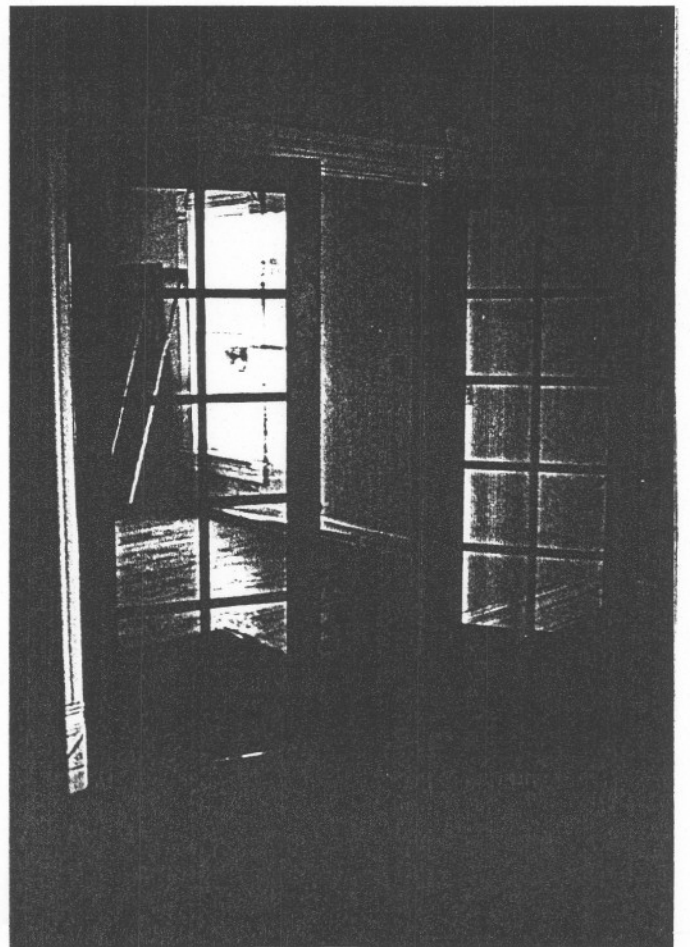
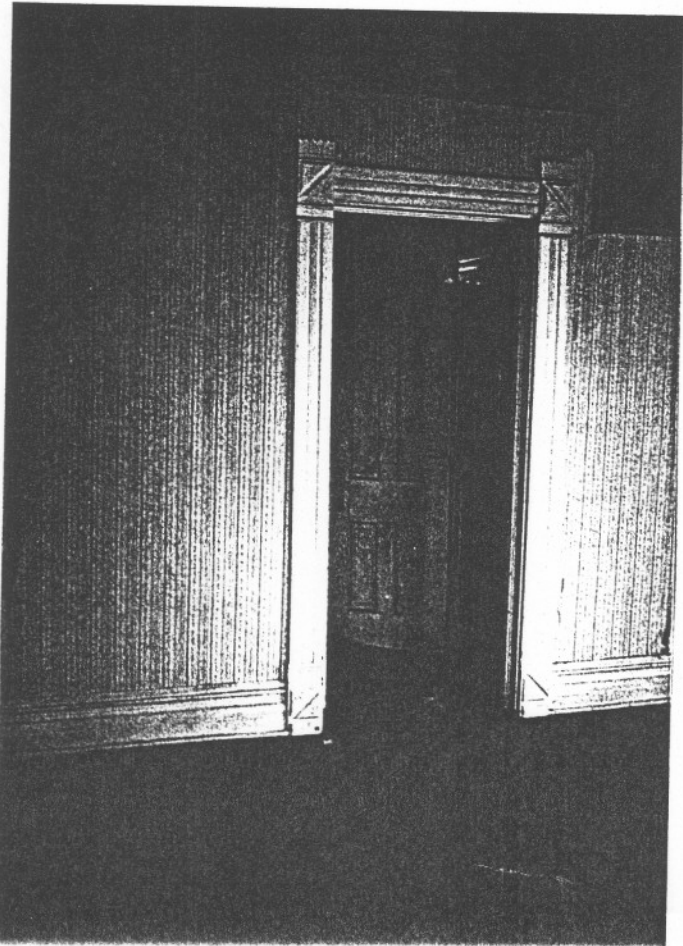
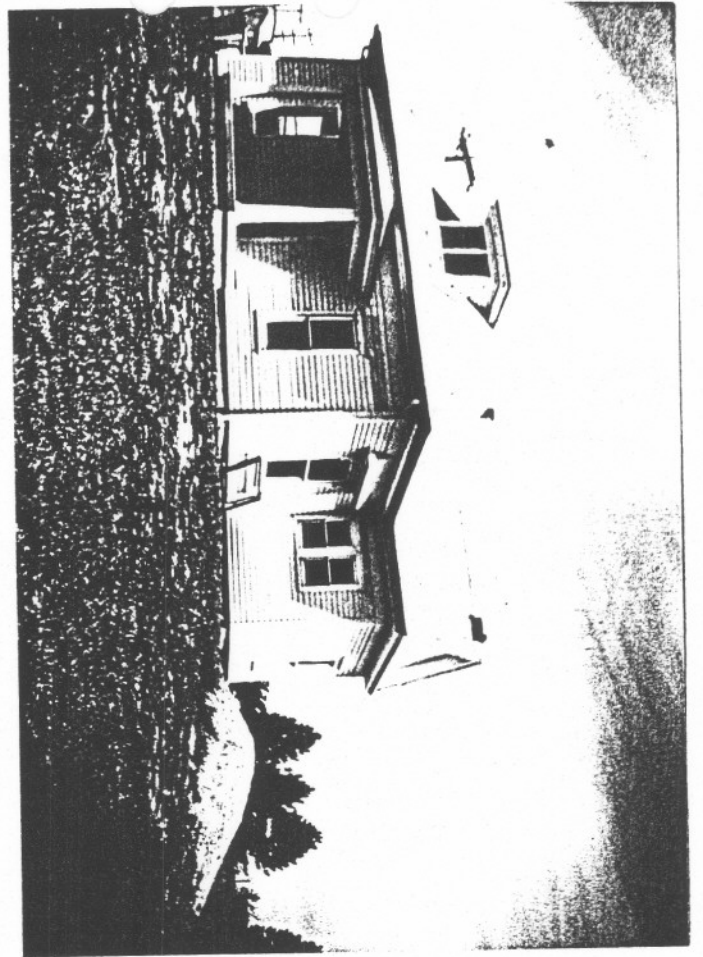
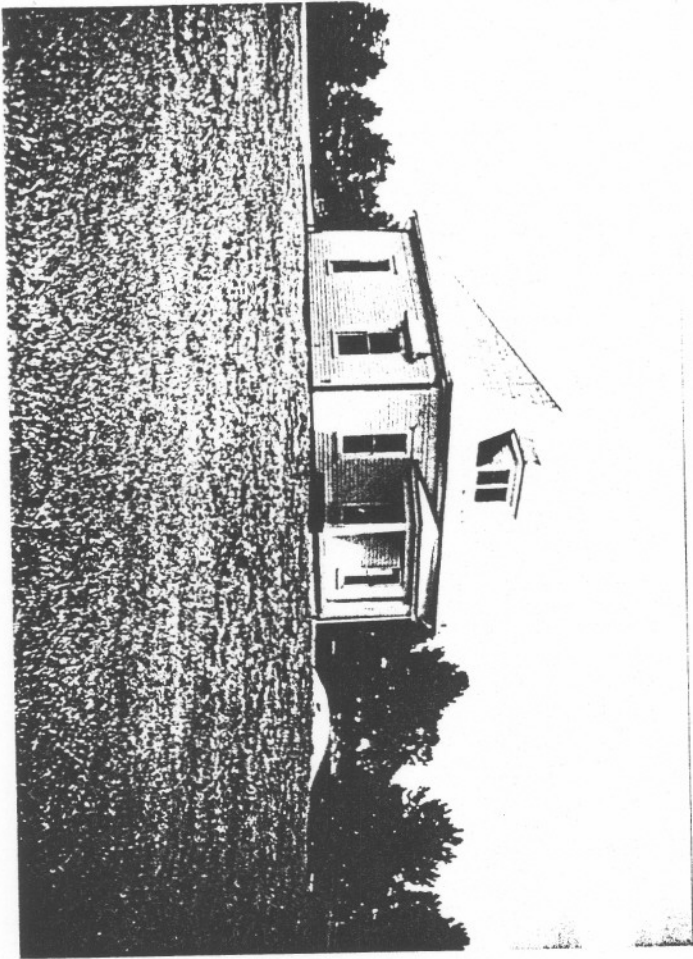
After being moved, the kitchen cabinets and sink were taken out and the loft was opened into one room. Two restrooms were added to the back of the building with outside access. Thermal tinted, daylight diffused windows and a new furnace and air conditioner were installed. Falling and damaged plaster was replaced with drywall. A secure door will replace the old front door which is ill-fitting and vulnerable.

The home is on the north side of the recreated "village" of "Old Jefferson Town" on Jefferson County Historical Society property. The village contains a jail from Winchester; a two story country store building from McLouth; the former Tibbott Neighborhood school now houses the memorabilia of John Steuart Curry; the Kilgore -Plum Grove former school houses contain the library of the JCHS Genealogical Society and the JCHS museum; the Edmonds church comes from four miles north of McLouth; the Wellman schoolhouse, a country school from midway between Oskaloosa and Lawrence; the Ninceheler home from Oskaloosa; an 1875 bowstring bridge from 1 1/2 mile north of Meriden, formerly crossing Rock Creek, is on the National Historic Register as of January 4, 1990; a reconstructed bandstand built on a reduced scale after the bandstand formerly at the Oskaloosa County Courthouse; a farmstead windmill and stock tank; a statute rendition of the moment Sam Peppard's wind wagon was carried aloft by a whirlwind on his journey to Colorado, created by Matt Frazier; and a rock bench built from rocks which were a part of the Old Oskaloosa high school. All of these parts of the village are from Jefferson County, Kansas.

The effect of the move has put the house in a secure situation. If the building was to be saved, it was logical that it should be a part of Old Jefferson Town. The reason for that is that a devoted first cousin of John Steuart Curry, Nelle Curry Manville, had saved pictures, books, articles, extensive artifacts of and related to her cousin and had set up a large room in the Tibbott building to display the work of John Steuart Curry. She acted as researcher, collector, curator and docent for these possessions which were displayed for the public and which will be moved into the Curry home when renovation is completed.

The original Curry home was wood frame construction, native limestone rock foundation and a brick chimney on the west side of the house, in the middle of the outside and partially inside kitchen wall. The interior had yellow pine trim and flooring. The walls were lath and plaster. Windows were double hung with wooden frames. The front of the house faced north. In moving, to incorporate the home with the Old Jefferson Town buildings, the house was turned 180°, the front now faces south. The brick chimney was split down three sides, possibly lightning damage, and interior bricks were crumbling, so the chimney was removed. The subfloor in the kitchen was rotted out, as well as part of the kitchen floor. Burned areas were around where a coal stove had set. The window frames were in poor condition, some badly rotted.

The loft was opened, making one room, because the stairway to the loft is narrow and steep, 45 degree angle, and will not be accessible to the public. The John Steuart Curry collection cannot all be shown at one time because of limited space in the house, therefore the loft will serve for storing items not on display and to house a file for correspondence, newspaper and magazine articles about Curry. Special exhibits can be drawn from this part of the collection. Having temperature controlled space is an important consideration, since we have no other building with this feature.



Section #8- Historical Significance

According to the Dictionary of Contemporary American Artists, Fifth Ed., 1982, Paul Cummings, John Steuart Curry was born November 14, 1897 near Dunavant, Kansas:

Attended Kansas City Institute School of Design - 1916
Chicago Art Institute School - 1916-18
Geneva College - 1918-19
Paris - 1926-27
Taught at Cooper Union, N.Y. City - 1932-36
Taught at the Art Students League, N.Y. City - 1932-36
Artist in Residence at Wisconsin University - 1936-1946

The property being proposed for the Register of Historic Places, has the significance of being the only home of John Steuart Curry in Kansas, where he lived from age two and one-half to eighteen years. The preservation will be as a living memorial to the artist, exhibiting his work and his artifacts in the possession of the Jefferson County Historical Society. The museum as a living entity will exhibit works of local artists, something which was of prime interest to John Steuart Curry. During the last ten years of his life he took leadership in the "Rural Art Program" as Artist in Residence at the University of Wisconsin. "He was virtually interested in a society that would encourage its native artists by accepting them as an important part of that society. As a creative artist he was tireless in his efforts to bring this about through whatever encouragement he could offer to those interested in the same problem and also by the example of his own work." from a tribute by Harry Wickey at the time of Curry's death. His own acknowledgement and that of his mother, teachers, sister, art critics and other artists attest to the influence of his home life and the rural environment on his painting. The effects of these surroundings during his formative years are evident in his mature work.

The following are excerpts from the memories of Mildred Curry Fike, John Steuart Curry's youngest sister: "The first thing to think about John Steuart Curry was that he simply had to draw. He could do that before he could write . . . One incident to show John's sensitivity to art was in the first grade. He could not read his "lesson" like the other children and the wise teacher asked him the reason. His reply was that picture of the cat on the opposite page was so ugly he could not stand to look at it. So the teacher told him to go to his desk and draw his own cat and come back tomorrow and read the lesson, which he did." . . . "Once when my father was expecting a neighbor to come by the house and John was the only one to answer the door, our father asked if Mr. McBride had been by. John said he did not know the man's name but he would draw a picture of him, which he did and our father recognized the neighbor as the right man."

"When John helped on the farm, he carried a pad pencil, and while plowing corn, he always stopped at the end of each row and whipped out the pad and drew a picture of a meadow lark, or a dove or rabbit or whatever was in sight. Needless to say my father was discouraged early in life as to making a farmer of John." . . . The most outstanding characteristic of John was that he just had to draw. And half of the time I'm sure he thought he was a complete failure. But he could never forget his ambition in art.

From Curry's brother-in-law, S.R. Fike the following excerpts from "The Inter-City Scene" Inter-City News, Fairmount Station, Missouri, September 13, 1946: "He knew what it meant to get up before daybreak to do the farm chores. As the oldest of five children he had done it many times. He knew what it meant to work hard for what he wanted. He worked one summer, while still a high school boy, as a section hand on a nearby railroad to earn money . . . Ten years ago I spent one summer Sunday afternoon with John driving around looking at the Hickory Point one room schoolhouse where he attended school. He picked up chalk to draw on the blackboard a train as he had done many times as a boy--probably with far greater workmanship but with no greater enthusiasm. I often worried if the teacher and students returning to school that fall appreciated the art on their blackboard. . . ." "It wasn't strange that one of John's first famous painting later used in the first issue of Life magazine was titled "Baptism in Kansas" showing that religious rite on a Kansas Farm. As a boy, John had seen Kansas baptisms in stock tanks and the people painted there were taken from real life, many of them identifiable with persons represented at his funeral or at any Sabbath service at the church where he always retained his membership."

"Dad Curry always said John was no farmer but he loved the farm--he loved the memories of a happy boyhood it brought back to him--the beauty of the rolling Kansas prairie." . . . "the native son of Kansas returned to Kansas and rests at the foot of the family gravestone, a natural stone of red granite worn smooth by the winds, snows and rains of thousands of years but still retaining the beauty of strength shown in the paintings of John Steuart Curry, native of Kansas."

From an article by Thomas Craven from Scribner's Magazine: . . . "As a boy on a Kansas farm, he (Curry) made pictures of windstorms, animals and vicissitudes of life on the plains. . . ." "In his mature years he painted the same things and won great renown. These subjects were important to him as his interpretation of them is important to the understanding of American life."

There can be no doubt that he was profoundly affected by his environment that the spirit of the plains entered his blood lending color and substance to all his experiences. He lived in a land of sudden and fearful change of weather, of smiting extremes of heat and cold, he saw the cornfield and the spring loveliness of the far off slope shriveled to the ground by the southwest wind. He saw unprotected herds slain by the driving sleet of blizzards, tornadoes come crashing down the wide valley with families diving into dugouts and white eyed horses running madly before the storm." . . . "At the close of his third year, he left school to study art. He passed the summer working on the railroad as a section hand" From material gathered (after studying in Paris) on two successive visits to Kansas he painted "The Tornado, awarded second prize in the Carnegie International of 1933; The Gospel Train; Return of Private Davis; Spring Shower, acquired by the Metropolitan Museum in 1933; and other dramas of the Middle West."

"In 1934, (his first wife died and he remarried), thanks to the wisdom and understanding of his second wife, Curry had recovered his old vigor and enthusiasm. . . Home again at Westport (Connecticut) he painted "The Lime Storm, the finest of all his Western landscapes."

"Curry explains, 'It is every day human material that lends my brush its fill of inspiration' but only material to which he is attracted by emotional association of long standing" . . . "In his Federal Mural 'Western Migration' treading on hallowed ground he has presented on a grand

scale, the characteristics of the pioneers."

... "he deals with objective facts and natural phenomena, but in the act of putting his materials together suffuses them with his love for the homeland, with the intimacies, sympathies, and memories he has preserved in all their purity and freshness."

"His genius is no antique presence . . . It is a living spirit, springing out of the round like the growing wheat, or out of threatening elements like the storm cloud."

"Subsequent visits to his parents' home in Kansas renewed his reverence from childhood memories of a fertile lane inhabited by heroic people. The Midwest was his inspiration."

... "Upon receipt of the capitol mural commission, Curry sated, 'In these panels I shall show the beauty of real things, under the hand of a beneficent nature.'"

From K.C. Times, August 30, 1946. (The Plainsman, July 1993, Vol. 3, #7)

"It's the iron in these farmers that I like to bring out in my paintings", Curry said. "If I can do that, it'll be better to me, than painting something pretty."

His father once remarked that young John "was always drawing. . . Yes, he was a good worker on the farm, when we could get him away from his drawing."

His teacher at the Hickory Point schoolhouse could have told another example of his desire to draw. Once, when she was having the class work out an arithmetic problem which had to do with Farmer Jones's chickens, she found John Steuart's slate filled with chickens--all kinds of chickens, some were cackling, some were rolling in the dust; but John's art work was good. He had the wrong answer, arithmetically, but the teacher gave him a passing grade because he had drawn the chickens so well.

From DEMCOURIER, April 1941, no author is credited. (The Plainsman, July 1992 Vol 2 #10)

Behind Curry's belief in this way of art (Regionalism) lie his love and understanding of his native Kansas. . . In his paintings of the homeland and his father and mother, whom he deeply loves, there is a homesick yearning for the barnyard, the fields and the sweeping Kansas prairies. Yes, it is easy to trace what lies behind many of his canvasses. John Curry's mother knew "the boy" very well. "Because John was a nervous child he was not sent to school until he was seven. In the meantime he was thoroughly spoiled by being read books of history and travel by his elders . . . He was always carrying a pencil and paper with him and asking people to draw for him what he couldn't draw for himself." "As a child John was terribly afraid of thunderstorms. I wonder why he paints so many of them. Perhaps he feels something sublime in their terrific power." "Life was a struggle for him. While not vitally interested in the farm he did his share of the work and after a hard day in the fields, night found him at his

drawing board while the household slept. Drawing, always drawing and no one to teach him except what little I could give him and a few lessons one summer, six miles away by horseback."

From K.C. Star, Sept. 8, 1946, no author credited. (The Plainsman Feb. 1993 Vol 3 #3)

The young Popes and the young Currys went to the Winchester High School at the same time Leo Pope's older brother, James W. Pope, now city freight agent for the Santa Fe Railroad in Denver, was a year behind John Curry in high school and bought Curry's ancient history book, art gallery and all, after Curry had plowed through ancient history. The Pope brothers' mother, Mrs. Willis Pope, discovered the book in an accumulation of old possessions two years ago in her home in Topeka. She was delighted that chance had preserved it.

The book is full of line drawings of speeding motor cars, puffing locomotives struggling up grades, motorists crashing through fences into pastures, wrecked freight trains strewn beside uprooted tracks. Speed is the keynote of the drawings most of which are pencil sketches. .

Railroads were another subject of particular interest to John Curry because he worked for a while as a section hand in order to earn money to go to art school. . . "The Klondike" ran within a mile of the Curry farm home, handy for John Steuart Curry to walk to work in the summer time. You can sense in the schoolbook pictures of trains and motor cars, going places fast, the eager desire of the young section hand, who always was being passed by trains and motor cars as he did his workday chore on the railroad right of way . . .

From the "The Plainsman" September 1992 Vol 3 #1.

Betty Curry Syverson donated the catalogue "Prairie Visions - Circus Wonders: The Complete Lithographic Suite of John Steuart Curry. A publication of the Davenport Art Gallery, Davenport Iowa, the April 27, 1980. The following quote is from the catalogue: "In his primary choice of subject matter, Curry portrayed what he knew. He reached back into the years he had spent growing up on a farm and his knowledge of the elements. Curry illustrated Kansas."

From 1941 issue of Demcourier magazine. This particular issue was dedicated to John Steuart Curry and contained articles about the artist written by his friends, family and business associates. This selection was written by Grant Wood. (The Plainsman, August 1992 Vol. 2 #11)

. . . It is, let me make clear, the depth and intensity of the artist's experience that are of first importance in art. More often than not, however a preponderance of a man's significant experience is rooted to a certain region. (Regionalism) In this way, a particular environment becomes important to his art. The point cannot be better illustrated than by reference to John Curry's background and his development as an artist. . .

"My whole life was made up of sensations," he says. "I used to go out in the garden and pull tomato vines to pieces so that I could smell them. I used to go out into the pasture to the mudholes where the doves had gathered so that I could see them fly up against the sky . . . I loved the smell of wet dust." . . .

"I found myself." Curry recalls, "during the dinner hour on the farm, backing one of the draft horses up against the barn, tethering it and drawing it. I can't say why." . . .

And years later, when he began the serious work which was to bring him recognition, he went back directly to these early experiences for his subject matter. He reverted to them intuitively, un-self consciously--not because he thought there would be a picturesque or sentimental appeal in the subject matter--but simply because his experiences in this environment were the most vivid and compelling he had undergone.

He painted from memory, the elemental terror of storms sweeping the prairie, the magnificence of the grain harvest, the brute struggle for survival. It was action he loved most to interpret: the lunge through space, the split second before the kill, the suspended moment before the storm strikes. He remembered the facts and accurately, but in his delineations he got beyond factual accuracy in to the realm of perception and aesthetic intuition.

He did not dress up his interpretations with studio tricks or veil them in romantic hazes. He painted them with a direct, homely realism--a realism as stark as the western plains, but humanized by a deep sympathy for the subjects depicted and dignified by a simple, reverent concept of the unity of nature and man.

Curry did not simply know his material: he was steeped in it. He commanded its full sensuous and psychological essence. From a million memories, sense impressions, and deep-lying emotional attitudes, it was part of him. . .

In the past decade, Curry has lent his talents to the other fields of subject matter--and with commendable results. . .

However, to my mind, his greatest work thus far remains in his interpretations of the American Midwest. The simple fact is that these depictions have the merits of his other work plus something more--an intensely personal quality which makes such a painting as "The Line Storm" one of the most moving creations in the whole of American art.

John Steuart Curry may be called a regionalist ~~painting~~ linking him with his friends, Grant Wood and Thomas Hart Benton, but the one thing which identifies his work, is that it portrays real places, real life events, real people. There is an honesty about his work. After coming back from his two years study in Paris, he was dissatisfied with his paintings of nudes, so he attended lectures on Anatomy and the Human Skeleton at the Art Students' League. He concentrated on studies and the/drawings by Leonardo Da Vinci of the human body and of animals. It is possible to see the difference his studies made in his paintings afterwards. His training in Paris, plus this technical knowledge gave him confidence and freedom of expression. Curry could not embrace the European artistic trends current during his lifetime, but grew in mastery for expressing himself, always wishing to paint so that people could understand his work.

John Steuart Curry painted what he knew. He knew well the place and the people where he was born. They appeared in his youthful work and throughout his life they were dominant subjects of his sketches and paintings.

His background served him well in his first professional work, book illustration. The style became limiting and eventually his illustrations were turning into art and not suitable for the market. After his return from Paris, he painted a number of decorative wall maps, which helped give him some experience for the murals he was later commissioned to paint. The Federal Art Project gave him a voice on a national level.

In his mature years, Curry painted his ideas on social realism of the past as well as the present. One can see his sympathies whether for fugitive slaves, pioneers or circus workers. In the Capitol murals he wished to present the history of Kansas, its present and his deep desire for the preservation of the quality of the land and of its people for the future. Critics praise his landscapes, Spring Shower, Wisconsin Landscape and The Line Storm, and those may be most pleasing, but he showed a deep interest in people and animals which surely can be traced to his growing up in intimate quarters with six others in a five room house, plus spending hours observing and sketching domestic and wild animals. He said of himself, "I was raised on hard work and the shorter catechism". The body of his art testifies to the "hard work" ethic. Seeking honest in his painting reflects his religious training.

John Steuart Curry's mother, sister, teacher and those writing about his life describe his devotion to drawing and art from early childhood. Sketches of animals filled the edges and backs of his school papers. Even in adulthood, letters he wrote and the envelopes were decorated with drawings. His school books and the hymnals in his church contained his sketches.

In "The Tornado", the storm cave and back of the house are exactly like , if not the back yard of the home where he spent his boyhood and youth. The fields in "The Line Storm" are those he knew. As a child, he drew the things surrounding him. As a mature artist he was still inspired by the countryside which had become a part of him and from which he created his greatest paintings. His father's comment that "John was no farmer but he loved the farm... he loved the memories of a happy boyhood it brought back to him.... the beauty of the rolling Kansas prairie," from writing by Curry's sister, Mildred Curry Fike.

During the summer of 1929, Curry spent six weeks with his parents in Dunavant. His time was spent drawing and painting the barnyard animals, Kansas farm life and portraits of his parent in their home, among many other things. By fall he had finished "The Tornado", "The Kansas Stockman" and "The Road Workers' Camp", which could have been in a grove near his home. After 1929, he returned home almost annually, no doubt drawn by the love for his parents and for the land.

The critics grouped John Steuart Curry as one of three Regionalists of the 1930's with Grant Wood of Iowa and Thomas Hart Benton of Missouri. The three actually developed their artistic styles independently and had only their midwestern background in common, becoming acquainted after they were well know. Curry knew George Bellows, John Sloan, Howard Pyle, Hopper and others who were realist painters of urban America during that same time.

Bret Waller wrote that "by lumping the three together may have made it impossible to perceive and evaluate their work independently. Now and in the future we may well discover the qualities of honesty, directness and sincerity that initially recommended Curry to the critics." Curry's background and his religious training imbued his painting with that honesty and sincerity and he became an artist not of just the region he came from, but an artist of national and international reputation, undoubtedly the most important of the three.

During his short lifetime, he painted the subjects from his background and the life past and present that he knew. He was influenced by the masters, Michelangelo, Rubens, Delacroix, and his wife said: "He felt more closely drawn toward Rembrandt.....I remember being in a museum, and John said of Rembrandt, 'you know, he speaks to me'". (From an interview conducted by Bret Waller.)

John Steuart Curry was obsessed by his calling and constantly sought to improve. Regarding his work, he said: "The critics..... they're always looking for a label to put on people." He wanted to be known as a painter whose work the public could understand and sought to master his gift.

John Steuart Curry planned his Kansas Capitol murals to depict KANSAS PASTORAL, The Riches of the Land, The Kansan and The Kansas Mother; TRAGIC PRELUDE included The Plainsman, Coronado, Padre Padilla and John Brown, with a tornado, Prairie fire and border war in the background. His work before this had sparked praise and criticism, but with the Capitol painting, the added ingredient of politics and factions fed conflict over the murals. Curry tried to explain that he wanted "to get into his pictures the iron that is in Kansas people; not a soft, soppy presentation."

The arguments started in 1937 and went on until 1941. Some criticism was over trifles. Some people felt Curry didn't show the "law abiding progressive state". When he asked to have the marble removed so that he could paint the third part of the murals, the State Executive Council refused. Curry said, "Probably more people would come to see the murals than to see the marble." Roy L. Matson in the Wisconsin State Journal wrote: "I have stood, half a dozen times, before Curry's John Brown and looked at it half an hour at a time..... I have learned more history and more love of my country in one of those half hours than from all the dog eared texts of my tender years.

"How long have I watched entranced a slab of Italian marble?....."

A body of people wished to downplay the true history of Kansas, but F. H. Roberts, ninety year old editor of the Oskaloosa Independent, who had lived through that history, said of the murals: "They give a splendid portrayal of Kansas history. Kansas history has been violent and punctuated with bloodshed and cyclones."

Curry too knew and restudied his state's history before planning the murals. "The series would be one that I could do only for my native state", he told the murals committee. He left Kansas deeply hurt by the unjust criticism he endured and the fact that he could not complete his planned painting.